

FRAMES FOR A VIEW

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN VERONIKA KELLNDORFER AND MARK LEE:

M.L.:

In your piece on Schindler's Lovell Beach House, I am intrigued by the overlapping spatial dynamics within the picture plane – there is this striated foreground, middle ground, background that works with the grid of Schindler's glazing mullions; and then there are these diagonals of the balcony that cuts across the grid and aligns with the edge of the picture frame. Looking at this piece one tends to oscillate between the single-point perspective of the Picture Window and a flat modernist space.

V.K.:

The window of the Lovell Beach House is an ideal example of how architecture transforms into an image for me. As you referred to, it is not in the Renaissance or Albertian sense of the picture as a window to the world but a reversed condition: The window itself is the picture, together with the traces of habitation, the grid structure formed by the glazing mullions, and the dramatic diagonal of the balcony breaking-through the glass. In the foreground the bourgeois interior, in the middle ground the windowpane, in the background sand and sea. A closer look reveals people sitting under sunshades, a couple rolling out a beach mat, sailboats, a wooden lifeguard tower, a beach tent. The horizon line is blurred in the hazy afternoon light. It is unclear where the sea becomes the sky. The atmosphere and subject matter of the work recall *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte*, by the French painter Georges Seurat. The silkscreen grid of tiny dots burned into the glass is a further reference to Seurat's pointillism. The interior is divided from the exterior by that thin membrane of glass.

M.L.:

So the interior and the exterior spaces, along with all the layers in between, are compressed methodically onto the surface.

V.K.:

What you see is the radical integration of interior and exterior space. I wanted to address the layers oscillate within the image, a phenomenon that could occur in any window along the Californian coast as well as the window of the Lovell Beach House. It is a phenomenon that addresses both the universal and the specific.

M.L.:

The way you describe your piece reminds me of the radical tenets outlined in Schindler's 'Space Architecture' Manifesto written almost a hundred years ago.

V.K.:

In the regards to spatial exploration, Schindler is one of my Californian heroes and I am touched by his underestimated importance during his lifetime.

M.L.:

As an architect, I have always been interested in your work; not because you use architecture as a subject matter in a narrow sense or in the way an architectural photographer would, but because architecture seems to be but one of the mediums from which to address the larger issue of space; and in particular – pictorial space, which finds its primacy in painting. Could you talk about this relation between architecture and painting – between a three-dimensional vs. two-dimensional, between a physical vs. a projected space?

V.K.:

This question points directly into a central theme of my work. Often architectural details serve as the foil for a conceptual examination of the construction of space—a theme that is constitutive of both architecture and painting. I am captivated by the notion of architecture as a projection onto a two-dimensional plan in the space. In painting it is always the projection of space onto the surface – the back-projection of something three-dimensional onto a two-dimensional surface. In the case of the Lovell Beach House, I extracted that analog shot, taken with a five by four inch camera, and then transferred the image into another space. The grid pattern of the silk-screen print gives the photographic image a more open and less private definition, while at the same time the reflections on the glass allows the real space to interact with the printed space. With the decision of maintaining the glass transparent and not opaque, the typically excluded space behind the picture amalgamates with the printed background and adds another layer to the layers within the overall image.

M.L.:

The subject of modern architecture has played an important role in your work. Along with Schindler, you have worked with buildings by Mendelsohn, Mies van der Rohe, Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright, the Case Study architects, the Italian Fascist architects, or anonymous GDR architecture; what is it about the image or content of modern architecture that appeal to you?

V.K.:

As the architect Bruno Taut said, architecture has to follow certain functional necessities first, there must be a door, a kitchen, the windows have to bring in a certain amount of light, and then again it has to follow topographic premises. Sometimes I envy you for all the given rules,

whether they are inherent or predetermined, you have to work with at the outset; in the way that a window with its frame and glazing mullions follows other rules than just composition, or balancing harmonic or disharmonic elements. So I would say my ongoing interest is a double one: On one hand in the special appearance of a building and on the other hand in the secret decisions that have led to certain formal qualities. I am always attracted to these unintentional aspects that are shared between everyday architecture as well as some of the icons of modern architecture.

M.L.:

In many ways, I think your interest in architecture mirrors my own interest in art. While our disciplines could share many formal attributes in the end products, the *raison d'être* for their respective existence is completely different, and hence the radical difference in approaches. In architecture, we often have to transform what is necessary and required into physical form, and in the process make it seem inevitable, it is a little bit masochistic. I am always envious of the artist's ability to forge and define the parameters to the work. Looking at art - a parallel discipline to architecture, allows me to examine our own work from a different perspective.

V.K.:

I am very curious to hear how you would describe your approach in case of the Hill House, what inspires you? Which comes first? Do you think first of it as sculptural form or do you think in plans and drawings? For me the Hill House is a very site-specific work with a strong and unexpected quality.

ML:

In the case of the Hill House, the process was very different from any projects we have before or after. The steep and irregular site was deemed unbuildable by the city, and rather than considering the restraints as policing devices; we turned them into design devices. So we created a maximum buildable envelope while engineering a minimum footprint to save on construction cost. In other words we designed the house three-dimensionally from outside in, because addressing the constraints placed on the exterior envelope was more urgent than the interior organization. While the form of the house - the result of city restrictions and engineering, happened very automatically; we had a parallel interest in creating an object that is both strange and familiar at the same time. Hence I am glad that you see the house both as a sculpture as well as something that is very site-specific within its context.

V.K.:

I did not know the city considered the site as unbuildable, how interesting that even though you had to work from outside-in, you managed to create that amazing interior space; a space which not only overlooks the canyon but seem to be in touch with the canyon.

ML:

How the views and apertures relate with the volume is something important for our work. Among other reasons, our impetus to create an abstract volume, to erase as much articulation as possible, is to distill the house down to one gesture. So whether you look at the house from a distance or up close, it is the same. There is no foreground, no middle ground, only background. As a result of this, the view replaces the middle ground, becoming almost like one of the walls of the house.

V.K.:

For my upcoming show at Christopher Grimes Gallery in Los Angeles this April, the exhibition will be built around the Lovell House piece, installed as a sliding glass piece. And during the research for this project I found a text Schindler wrote in 1947 describing the Wolfe house: "Instead of digging into the hill, the house stands on tiptoe above it. The design consciously abandons the conventional conception of the house as being a carved mass of honeycombed material protruding from the mountain, for the sake of creating a composition of space units in and of the atmosphere above the hill." Do you think Schindler's description relates to your approach on the Hill House?

ML:

There is certainly a visual effect of dynamic equilibrium we were trying to achieve; something that is balanced, but not a type of harmonious balance in the Miesian sense, but a balance that is dangerous, an equilibrium which threatens to topple or roll over at any moment. Schindler has been a pioneer in rethinking the gestalt of hillside building. In many ways, this subject of mass and volume is closely related to the issues of frames and views that we have been discussing; in that the gestalt of the architectural mass is often the first step in situating the conditions for viewing. If designing a building is equivalent to cooking, the process of abstracting the volume is equivalent to marinating, like preparing the food before it is cooked. Designing the windows is the real act cooking itself. The openings are what matters most. They are what connect us to the outside and beyond.